



U.S. EMBASSY - BAGHDAD

2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-Iraqi Provinces Get Two New US Development Teams -

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May 26, 2008

Karbala and Najaf Provinces - A new chapter in the reconstruction and stabilization partnership between the United States and Iraq has begun with the establishment of two new PRTs (Provincial Reconstruction Teams) in southern Iraq.

U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker traveled from Baghdad May 24 to attend opening ceremonies held in the cities of Karbala and An Najaf, the capitals from which the new PRTs will operate.

In dedicating the two new development sites, Crocker said, "the stage is now set for a new era of Iraqi and American cooperation."

The PRTs are a Department of State initiative that works with local and provincial governments to build their capacity to govern and bring essential services to citizens as well as to foster economic development. First established in November 2005 there are now 29 teams serving in all 18 of Iraq's provinces.

"With security now fully in the hands of Provincial authorities," Crocker said. "We are here to demonstrate to the people of Karbala Province the U.S. commitment and support for Karbala's new surge, the surge in economic development, enhanced governmental capacity, mature democratic institutions, respect for human rights, development of an effective media, quality education, and strong civil society organizations."

The PRTs had been operating limited programs in Karbala and Najaf from offices in nearby Babil Province, but according to Crocker, the Iraqi governors of the two provinces made it clear they wanted to have a closer working relationship with PRT teams by basing them in their own capitals.

Governor Akeel Al-Khzaly remarked on the new relationship noting, "This is a day of positive transformation for Karbala. Today we remember the hard work and sacrifice from all sides. We want to start this day, this path with the PRT... so my friends let's stand together."

Karbala and Najaf are two of the most holy sites in Islam and are known as the "heart" and "mind" respectively of the worldwide Shi'a community that numbers around three hundred million followers. The recent commemoration of Ashura and Arbayeen – two Shi'a religious holidays -- brought 10 million Iraqi and international visitors to the two provinces.



US Ambassador Ryan Crocker is welcomed at the Najaf Governate Center by Governor Assad Altaee of Najaf on the right and Angus Simmons, Najaf PRT leader on the left.

The clergy in Najaf in particular have tended to project strong background influence on the course of Iraqi's recent political past and the majority Shi'a government.

After arriving in Najaf Ambassador Crocker was given a short driving tour of the city with Governor Asaad Al-Taa'i. An important initiative for Najaf is work on a new airport to serve the millions of pilgrims that visit each year during religious holidays. Crocker said, "I've learned much about the tourism infrastructure that is being planned and the airport will be an important part of that planning."

Crocker was also impressed with the presence of Iraqi security forces noting, "You have security here and we are moving from the point where Americans provide security to where Americans depend on Iraqis for security."

"So, here in Najaf things are as they should be," he said. "Iraqi forces, police and army are protecting foreign visitors. And because of that security, many things are underway."

Most PRTs across Iraq are paired with an American unit. But the two new teams in Karbala and Najaf represent a watershed because they are located on bases of the Iraqi Army Eighth Infantry Division.

Crocker said, "As the security situation stabilizes you have opportunities." And "now you have PRTs that are able to co-locate with Iraqi security forces. It makes sense as provinces move to provincial control that we move forward now to have all the teams [located] in the provinces that they serve. That vision now becomes concrete."

At a news conference in Najaf Crocker explained how the PRT development relationship with provincial governments had shifted since 2003 when Saddam Hussein's dictatorship ended and the country lay prostrate. "Now, they're not looking for major reconstruction projects from us, instead they're looking for expertise, capital, ideas -- that's the phase we're moving toward" in our aid programs.

He continued: "We are going to help them [Iraqis] with budget execution....help them spend their own money. An example, he cited, was a program using Iraqi Government funds modeled on the U.S. military's Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP) fund.

"There's \$10 million for each province in that [Iraqi] fund," Crocker explained, and PRT experts in governance and economic development will assist with advice on how best to allocate those resources when asked by local and provincial governments.